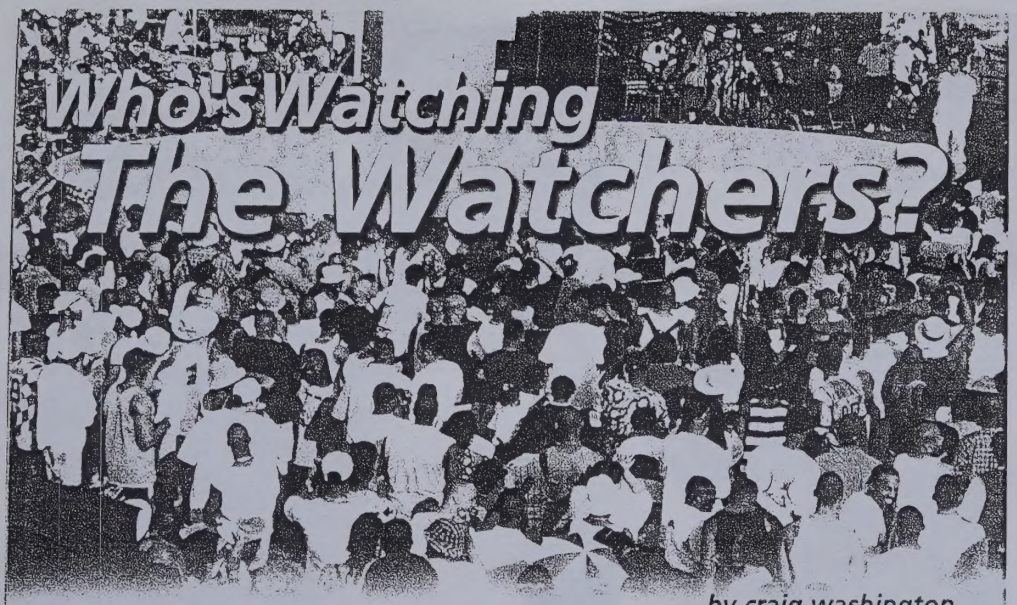
Who's Watching The Watchers?



by craig washington

Whatever Banneker Field couldn't hold was spilling out onto the sidewalks while various SUVs and sports cars locked down the surrounding streets. The invasion was in full force. Various species of polygendered, sgl, lesbigay folk flocked to the final perch of this migration. It was Black Pride Sunday, the last mass gathering of all the beautiful children who'd descended upon the capital. A live soundtrack of house, hiphop and reggae beats infused the air, scores of camcorders rolled to capture this vision of brown bodies, shaved heads, locks, loose drapings, tight shorts and less, and more. Anthony was thankful he was not home this weekend, since he would probably be manning a table amidst the throngs of Atlanta's finest. He and the other HIV prevention workers in town would have their hands full come Labor Day, so he wanted to make sure Memorial Day was no work and all play.

He had already been through the vendor village and scanned the bleachers twice before he finally spotted Simone. She was where she told him she'd be, at the big purple Imani Center tent. When he got close enough he started waving, but she was much too busy chatting up some woman who seemed quite fixated on Simone's words. He smiled to himself reflecting how she was such a natural charmer, one who attracted many sisters and brothers with her distinctive looks, style and activist convictions. He never had the fire in his belly for this work like she did. It was the only thing about her that made him jealous. He otherwise appreciated everything about her, especially the fact that she was ultra femme. There she was, holding court, so by the time he'd walked up on her, 2 more sistas were in her face. She was promoting some upcoming poetry slam when he finally caught her eye. She handed the women some flyers, quickly excused herself then ran from behind the table and wrapped Anthony in a luxurious hug. "Hey woman," he said. "You know I been looking all over for you and look at you, just working these poor sistas from all over the country." "Well, I know there's a world to save but a girl can't live on the revolution alone. Actually, these women are workin' me. Where's Scott?" He couldn't help but smile when she asked. Unlike several of his black friends, Simone always asked about Scott. They never talked about how she felt about him being with a white man for the past 3 years, but he knew she loved him enough to care about Scott. That was enough for him. I left him in the car at the corner with Saadika." "Saadika's here?" Simone was surprised, she'd heard a lot about Saadika without ever meeting her. "Yeah, can you believe it. You know with her, if it ain't a party or some ghetto fab soiree she ain't comin," he frowned. "Now, now" she said. "You know most of our community is not doing the out gay organizing thing!" "Yes, I know, all too well." "Stop pouting," she nudged him. "Let's hit it. You don't want to keep your sweetie waiting too long"

As they navigated through the crowd, Anthony felt a hand slide across his behind. He turned around quickly only to see a number of unfamiliar faces all paying him no mind. When he turned forward there was Nigel standing with arms folded and that wide-toothed grin of his. "Don't tease me like that, baby," Anthony said. Nigel held up both hands and pleaded, "I was just trying to show some love." Nigel was a good friend from Anthony's Morehouse years. Now a D.C. attorney, he was a well-known donor who supported D.C. Pride and other black gay institutions across the country.

"Nigel, this is my girl Simone. She is the co-director of the Imani Women's Health Center. She's supposed to be doing outreach, but I caught her doin' some overtime, if you know what I mean." "Well," Nigel offered," there's all kinds of ways to reach out." Simone rolled her eye at Anthony. "Anyway," she said, "Anthony's told me some great things about you. We need more brothers like you to give more than lip service to this work." "Why thank you, Simone. So where are you all headed?" "Back to his hubbie," Simone cooed, nodding at Anthony. Three young men, more pretty than handsome, swaggered past them, one winked at Nigel and said "Whassup! " "Ooh and I just found mine," Nigel declared turning to behold his departing admirer.

"Now that's what I like about D.C. We have real boys for you. Not like those girls in Atlanta perpetrating." "Tell me bout it," Anthony agreed. "Atlanta is full of bottoms wearing top gear, meanwhile everybody's wanting to get done." "There aint nothing wrong with a man wanting to get fucked but I don't think he has to act like a woman," Simone added. "Personally I resent some of these flamboyant brothers. I think they take it a little too far." "You're right Simone, some of these so-called men are more woman than you!" "Now I don't know about all that," Simone laughed. "But that's one reason I like hanging with you Anthony. I don't have anything against queens, but I like being out with a masculine brother. You get more respect on the street." Nigel just couldn't let that go. "Now don't let me have to call you out. I know a certain person who definitely likes getting done every now and then." "Okay Nigel, I admit it. I do. But you don't see me butch one day, then nellie the next. Just because I'm gay doesn't mean I have to follow some stereotype. It seems to me if more gay men acted more like men we would be more accepted. "

"This is your target population, isn't it.?," Nigel pointed out. "Sure is. I tell you it would make my job a lot easier if these brothers would stop whoring around and start loving themselves more." "Here, here," Nigel affirmed. "Okay but, how do you do that?," Simone asked. Nigel and Anthony both looked perplexed. " You know, love yourself. Everybody from Oprah to Chante Moore talks about this loving yourself stuff, so I wanna know, what does that look like? Where do you start?" "I don't know," Anthony began, sounding irked. "Getting into yourself. Not looking for a relationship to do it for you, reading an Iyanla Vanzant book." "Well, what if I can't read that type of writing?" "Then you need to take a remedial course," Nigel snorted. "There's no excuse to be poor and dumb." Simone shook her head, wanting to change the subject she'd just brought up. Nigel caught her gesture and went to explaining himself. "Oh, don't mind me at all. I'm just totally allergic to poverty." Simone shot back, "Well you might want to take something for that, since this is Chocolate City and not everybody gets to work on the Hill."

"Where are you guys staying?", Nigel asked, ignoring Simone's comment. He was one of those composed queens who would not let anyone see his plumage ruffled. "With a friend, Saadika." "Do I know her?" "No." Nigel didn't push it but after a long pause Anthony added, "She's really Scott's friend." He gave a polite smile. "She's not, shall we say, my type." "Well, of course not, she's, well, a 'she'," Simone laughed. "No, I mean she's one of those hardcore types, you know what I mean, no make-up, flat shoes forever, just very dykey." "Well you know," Simone added, "Some sisters especially the older ones are into that role-playing stuff." "Yeah well just because you're a lesbian, doesn't mean you have to give up being a lady. I mean there isn't anything feminine about her." "And what's so terrible about that?" Nigel asked. "Never mind," Anthony answered. He seemed annoyed at the question. Simone focused her eyes then smiled, "There they are" Nigel was a little apprehensive but he asked anyway. "If you don't mind, I'd like to tag along with you all," Nigel said to Anthony. Anthony tried to sound enthused. "Sure, we need to catch up anyway."

Scott and Saadika were too caught up in their own conversation to notice them until Simone knocked on the window where Scott was sitting. This startled him which amused Nigel. Anthony waved and flashed a Colgate smile for Saadika to open the door. He heard Nigel say something to Simone then she answered, "No, he's not like that. He's okay." Anthony felt nauseous. He wanted to say something, to tell Nigel that Scott was not every white racist he met, but he didn't want to escalate things. More from what Nigel didn't say than what he did, Anthony knew Nigel didn't like him being with a white man. He thought it best to let things be. After introductions were made, Simone suggested the poetry slam at Sistaspace, a gallery owned by a black lesbian couple. Nigel hesitated but she explained that the gallery is owned by women and open to everyone. "You mean, just like all those galleries men own? " Saadika added.

Simone sat up front with Saadika and they swapped opinions about the Pride activities. Nigel was strategically wedged between Scott and Anthony. Anthony was trying not to be too obvious about observing Simone and Saadika. He hoped Saadika would not make some tacky play for his friend. "So Scott is it?" Nigel began. "Is this your first DC Black Gay Pride." "Yes it is and I'm having a ball" "I guess you are," Nigel smirked.

Continues On Page 29

written by senior staff writer
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Standing Outside The Fire

By: Andrew Marcellus

I must have resembled a lunatic. There I was, on the last night of my summer vacation, and in less than twenty-four hours, I would be back in Atlanta. Right back to where we were when I left, with me standing outside the fire. The night air gave no justification for the goose flesh that was beginning to spread from my arms to my back. Standing there bare chested, muscles flexed, eyes fixated and breath bated, I had not realized the temperature until the rivers of sweat began to pour stinging waves into the corners of my eyes. A victim of involuntary paralysis, I watched as the hot colors, the reds, oranges and yellows, danced around what had been my prized possessions. Influenced by either emotion or pyre--I can't remember--my eyes began to water as I sped through the familiar lines. I watched them disappear one by one--every card, letter, poem, and memento even the ticket stub I'd saved from the Fox. I saw the words and images that once gave me so much happiness crumple and whither. The luminous pile in my parents' garage began to physically manifest the dark lies and black irony that was the basis and the final spin of our relationship. Everything was there. Everything except the photo. My grip was tight and I wondered if I had the strength to really let go.

You probably don't even remember me taking it. It was at your graduation party. You're wearing the Donna Karan blazer you bought in New York during spring break. We talked every night that week. The brown and olive tweed blend looked so good next to your skin. Even in spite of the alcohol-induced scarlet frames, your eyes are a perfect russet hue. People sit at the tables behind you. They dance on the floor beside you. They move all around you, but in the midst of people, food, liquor, music, lights, dark, and decorations, all I can see is you.

The blazer perfectly matches the thin olive turtleneck you are wearing. I close my eyes and feel the fabric prickle my face as we kissed. It was a perfect match, just like us, but there are so many things I regret. Mostly I regret falling in love with that smile. You smiled so much that night. Perfect smile. Perfect teeth. Perfect lips. Your smile is the whole of the photo. As always, it kept the room ablaze.

You always smile when you sing. The only thing missing in the photo is your voice. Even though you drank about a quarter of the huge bottle of vodka you're so proudly brandishing, you sang to me all the way home. That night in the car, you did the three things you do best. You sang. Damn, sometimes I wonder if the liquor doesn't make you sound even better than usual. You directed your invisible choir. I love to watch you conduct. When you get really excited and the music swells and goes all through your body, and on those Sundays when the choir has really prepared their music and projects like crazy, your shirt comes untucked, you break a sweat and your eyes get as bright and big as new money. Seeing you with your music excites me like fireworks to a child. But the thing you did better than all of that, the thing you mastered that night, and many others like it-- was lie. You lied to me about how much you loved me. That, my baby, my perfect love, my booskie... It is that that you do so incredibly well. You did it with words, ways, in speech and in poetry. Hell, you could even do it in three languages, and I believed you and matched your declarations one hundred fold.

What I couldn't see in the photo was a person who falls in and out of love with the seasons. I didn't see a person who truly meant well, but couldn't give me the love and attention that I needed and deserved. It doesn't show me where you were when I called and you weren't there. That perfect smiling mouth has an answer for every question except, "How do I let you go?" I stood there with your photo in my hand and looked into your eyes, and I did what I knew I had to do before I came back to Atlanta. I saved my life. I saved my self respect. I saved my self esteem. I saved the last bit of me that I had left after an entire summer of wondering why the calls and the letters stopped. I looked at that perfect skin, soft wavy hair, and sweet loving face, and said goodbye.

I must have resembled a lunatic standing there: bare chested, muscles flexed, eyes fixated, and breath bated. But I did it. I let it go. I let you and that perfect image go. I watched the reds, oranges and yellows swallow up the smile and the sorrows that I had been foolishly trying to hold on to for much too long. I watched the ends curl up and the sparkle in your alcohol-induced red eyes turn to a luminous blaze. And for the first time, in a long time, it felt good to be standing outside the fire.

Who's Watching ... Continued From Page 27

Scott pretended not to notice. "At first," he said "I didn't think it was appropriate for me to even be here. But I wanted to experience this with Anthony." He took Anthony's hand in his. "We usually do the regular Pride in June. "You mean the White Pride," Nigel said. It was not a question. Anthony stopped himself from coming to the rescue. "Well I wouldn't call it White Pride, since it's for everybody. Actually, if anybody is being separatist it's Black Pride." "Oh really" Nigel' voice leapt into falsetto. "Sure, I mean the Pride folks have done a lot to make it a diverse event." "Oh please, Scott. Tell me who sits on the board of Pride, a multiracial group or white people." "Well, white people" "And who comprises the staff?" "I know where you're going with this." "Good, I'm so glad you do. White people, that's who. And that's who that Pride is for, has always been for. Excuse me, the regular Pride. For all those regular white people."

"That's it," Anthony blurted. I'm so tired of black people criticizing whites for not being inclusive enough while they sit on their collective ass." "They?" Saadika said out loud to no one in particular. It went past Anthony. "Most of them couldn't spell 'out' or think about marching, at least in the daytime, if you paid them. I've spent the last 5 years trying to save the lives of men who don't give a shit about themselves and frankly, that's not the white man's fault." Scott sighed out loud. Nigel waved his hand high as if praying for some self-control. They pulled up in front of the gallery in silence. Saadika let everyone out first, so that she could go find a parking space. Simone offered to stay with her while the guys went on ahead.

As they pulled out Simone asked, "So what do you think about all that?" "All what?," Saadika joked. "I try not to get caught up in all that stuff you know. Hey, I'm bout livin my life. I ain't trying to make no waves or wave no banners neither." "But what if everybody thought like that. We wouldn't have any progress" "Who said I'm trying to be everybody. I'm just one sister in the world, sister! Seems to me like some people need to check themselves before they go trying to fix other people." Simone wanted to challenge her, ask her why she would not get involved in activist work. It seemed like so many sisters she knew had an opinion, but would never get up and do something. She decided to leave well enough alone. She was enjoying this space without the guys around. She realized how different Saadika was from the way Anthony described her. There was nothing "hardcore" about this woman. She was definitely butch, a soft butch, sure, but butch no doubt. Her voice was a warm raspy sound, her smooth skin framed by rows of short tight locks. As Saadika spoke she wanted to count them with her fingertips one by one. There must have been thousands.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT MONTH.